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# 'Mystery fish' earns state citation award for Appomattox angling enthusiast

By BILL SHERROD

For three days late last month, word spread quietly among members of the local angling community that Appomattox County might possibly have laid claim to a world-record fish.

When a state game commission biologist wrote the final chapter to the story of Bob Taylor's 10-pound mystery fish, Appomattox County was denied its claim to fame. However, local fishing enthusiasts now have a story that will be repeated many times around woodburing stoves when winter's chill forces anglers to stow their gear till the warm days of spring.

Taylor, a Lynchburg native who lives on Route 633 near Evergreen, took advantage of two weeks of spring-like weather in late February to unlimber his fishing rods and get a few hours practicing his favorite pastime.

"It's the way I like to relax," says Taylor, a manufacturing engineer at Babcock and Wilcox in Lynchburg. Taylor takes his relaxation seriously: he is the regional director of the Virginia Bass Angler's Sportsmen's Society (BASS) Federation.

So on Feb. 19, a Sunday, Taylor told his wife that he was going to Holliday Lake, to spend the afternoon fishing for largemouth bass.

It was a warm day; very warm, in fact, for the time of year. The breeze that rippled the lake's surface was strong, but it was a summer-like wind.

Taylor launched his boat, and with his electric motor moved across the cove to the bank opposite the boat ramp. But less than halfway across the cove, he realized that something was wrong. The battery was rapidly discharging, and by the time he had reached the spot he planned to fish, he had effectively lost use of the motor.

"The wind was blowing pretty hard," Taylor recalls. "I said to myself, 'this isn't a very good day to be on the water with no motor.'"

Still, he figured since he had come this far, he might as well make a few casts, without venturing too far from the boat ramp.

"I cast twice to a partially submerged tree," Taylor recalls. "I was using a Cotton Cordell Wally Diver (fishing lure) and a Garcia baitcasting reel. On the third cast, the lure got hung in the submerged branches of the tree. I gave it a good yank, and when it cut loose, it kicked up to the surface."

When the lure broke the surface, the water exploded with the ferocity of a massive fish's strike.

The fight was on. Taylor was using relatively light line – 10-pound test – so he had to play the fish with caution, tire it out and lead it in, rather than horsing it in toward the boat.

"At first, I thought I had hooked a huge bass," Taylor says. "Even after the fish made its first run at the boat, I thought it was a bass. I looked into the water, and all I saw was 20 or 24 inches of green and white, and I thought, 'Whew, what a big old largemouth.'"

But when the fish ran past the boat the second time, Taylor knew that this was not a bass. Its long, sleek, torpedo-like body was unmistakable.

"I figured it was a chain pickerel," Taylor says. "I'd caught quite a few pickerel out of Holliday Lake in the four- to six-pound range."

Gradually, the fish tired. "It didn't take as long to play him down as you might think," Taylor recalls. "I was by myself, so I don't know exactly how long I had him on. But I'd say it was 10 minutes at the most."

As the fish came toward the boat on its final run, Taylor knew it was time to get it out of the water. There was only one problem: he didn't have a landing net.

Grabbing the fish by the lower lip – a popular way of landing largemouth bass without a net – was out: members of the pike family have a mouthful of needle-like teeth to rival a barracuda's.

"I remembered reading where you could land a fish like this by grabbing it with your thumb and forefinger in its eye sockets," Taylor says. "So, when I worked him up next to the boat, I slipped my hand up its back, grabbed it by the eye sockets, and flipped it into the boat."

At that point, Taylor knew that he had an extraordinary fish. "I knew just by looking at it that it would weigh close to ten pounds," he recalls. "And, I knew that the state record for chain pickerel was around eight pounds."

So, Taylor took his jacket off, dipped it in the water to wet it, and wrapped the fish in it to keep it from dying. He then paddled his boat back to the ramp, loaded up, and headed away from the lake.

Taylor took the fish by the home of Appomattox game warden Charles Torrence, who told him to "get the fish weighed as fast as I could." He then took it to Food World, where the fish weighed in at an even ten pounds on the store's certified scales.

Taylor told a few of his friends at work Monday about the fish, which he believed might be a new state record chain pickerel. The next day, Bill Cochran of the Roanoke Times and World News called to ask him about the fish. He explained to Taylor that, it it was indeed a pickerel, it could be a new world record, since the existing world-record pickerel was a nine-pound, six-ounce fish caught in Georgia in 1960.

"On Wednesday (Feb. 22), Jack Randolph of the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries called from Richmond and said Joe Gray, the state's warm-water fish biologist, was going to come up and examine the fish," Taylor says.

Gray arrived and examined the fish that day and determined it was a northern pike, a fish very similar to the chain pickerel in appearance, but which grows much larger than the pickerel. The state-record northern pike is more than 20 pounds, and the world-record northern is over 40 pounds.

The unusual thing about this catch, besides the size of the fish itself, is that the northern pike is not native to this area. Pike are usually found in cold-water lakes and rivers in the northern region of the United States, and only through artificial stocking programs have they been introduced in Virginia and other southern states.

"Joe said that, as far as he knew, the state had never stocked any northern pike in Holliday Lake," Taylor notes. "But he called me back later, and said that after researching the game commission's records, he found that about 750 northern pike fry (young fish) had been put in Holliday Lake in 1974."

Gray's records, however, also indicated that fish-population samplings made in subsequent years showed no evidence that any of the stocked pike had survived. "And the scale sample that Joe took from my fish indicated that it was only about four years old," Taylor says.

Does this mean that Tayor's fish was spawned naturally from some of the northern pike that were originally introduced into the lake in 1974?

"The game commission says there's almost no chance that this pike was reproduced naturally from fish in the lake," Taylor says. "They assume it must have been put in there by someone else."

So, rather than a new world-record pickerel, Taylor found that he had caught a large -- but not exceptionally large -- northern pike.

Still, the pike is large enough to earn Taylor a state citation, his 15th such angling award in recent years. He has also received citations for largemouth and smallmouth bass, striped bass, white bass, and catfish. His biggest freshwater fish to date is a 32-pound striped bass which he caught in Leesville Lake, and he has a 30-pound striped bass in his freezer now waiting for the taxidermist.

And nestled next to that striped bass in Taylor's freezer is the 10-pound northern pike, also destined for the taxidermist.

"I decided to go ahead and have it mounted, since it's a nice fish, and so unusual," Taylor says.

And, for local anglers whose stories usually deal with "the one that got away," Taylor's fish will provide plenty to talk about in years to come.

BOB TAYLOR shows the 10-pound northern pike he caught in Holliday Lake on Feb. 19. The fish, which was 34 3/8-inches long and 15 ½-inches in girth, was frozen when this photo was made. The fish, which is not native to waters of this area, was large enough to earn Taylor a state angling citation award, his 15th in recent years.

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